



The Semiotics of Contemporary Rituals: Bridal Shower in Venezuela and the United States¹

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Abstract

This paper reflects a comparison of the Bridal Shower ritual as it is practiced in Maracaibo, Venezuela, and in Bloomington, Indiana, United States. The main purpose is to find out the similarities and contrasts and to elaborate a hypothesis on interpretation according to which this ritual expresses different specific values and ideas about meaningful feminine roles in Venezuelan and American cultures. Both expressions of the same ritual are analyzed using a semiotic approach.

Key words: semiotics, ritual, bridal shower.

- 1 The analysis presented here is based in a research which results will appear in two papers: "Semiotics of the Ritual: Contribution to the Analysis of Bridal Shower in Venezuela" to be published soon; and "Semiótica del Rito en la Sociedad Contemporánea: la Despedida de Soltera en los Estados Unidos". (Revista Relaciones, No. III, Agosto 1993:8-14). The first contains my approach to the Bridal Shower during a research carried out in Maracaibo, Venezuela, in 1990-1991. The second contains my analysis of the same ritual in Bloomington, Indiana, in 1991-1992.

Semiótica del rito contemporáneo: la despedida de soltera en Venezuela y en los Estados Unidos

Resumen

Este artículo contiene una comparación del ritual de la Despedida de Soltera (DdS), tal como se practica en Maracaibo, Venezuela, y en Bloomington, Indiana, Estados Unidos. El propósito fundamental es determinar las semejanzas y contrastes y elaborar una hipótesis interpretativa de acuerdo con la cual este ritual femenino expresa valores e ideas que son diferentes en la cultura estadounidense y venezolana. Las dos expresiones del mismo ritual son analizadas utilizando un enfoque semiótico.

Palabras claves: semiótica, rito, despedida de soltera.

I. I have been looking at the semiosis of ritual in contemporary societies the last two years², because I am very concerned with the importance of communication in our societies. As many sociologists and psychologists have pointed out many times, we live in a world suffering from the enormous paradox of having the most powerful technology of communication human beings ever had, and, at the same time, the greatest difficulties and limitations we can imagine to be able to achieve a true sense of real communication, to which the daily increase in people going to psychiatric consultation can attest. In such a situation, to look at the different ways human beings have developed to try to communicate

2 I would like to thank the **Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies** of Indiana University, for appointing me as a **Research Associate** during the 1991-1992 period. Thanks to the help and support of its faculty and staff I was able to carry out this research about the Semiotics of Ritual in Contemporary Societies. Particularly I would like to thank Dr. Thomas A. Sebeok and Dr. Jean Umiker-Sebeok for their stimulus and encouragement. J.E.F.

is a way of finding meaning in human culture. One of the most persistent communication processes in different human societies is ritual. As Frits Staal says, "man is addicted to ritual activity, a fact that is true of modern society as much as it is true for ancient societies, and that applies to so-called primitive communities as much as it applies to the so-called civilized world" (1982:v).

It is very important, it is very pertinent, to look at this kind of behavior as a communication process, which I believe the ritual is, that has been practiced by every people and every known culture. Ritual has been carefully studied in most ancient societies, but not so often in relation to us and to our contemporary society. I began this research about the bridal shower ritual asking myself simple questions like why do people do that, why do people engage themselves in repeated activities which seem to have, more or less, a common pattern? Why do people do that again and again? What does that mean? Of course, I am aware that I am not the first one to ask these same questions, but what I wanted to do as a contribution, after the first questions, in a field, as ritual study is, that has been studied for such a long a time and by so many reputed specialists, was, first, to offer a new approach that, I hope, will help us to better understand not only what a ritual means for a specific contemporary society, what people are trying to communicate to themselves and to other people of other groups, but also what kind of structures, what kind of semiotic processes are at stake in the ritual, what values are involved in which manner, and, finally, what they say to us about our own culture.

In societies like our Western societies, where it is possible to see a profound sense of a certain kind of logic, inherited from the Greeks and the Judeo-Christian civilization, it is easy to find ourselves shocked by meanings that, unexpectedly, we find at work in our own community. In research by Stephen Barley, which results were published in his paper "The Codes of the Dead: the Semiotic of Funeral Work" (1983), he shows how the semiotic work accomplished by the funeral director aims to show as alive a dead body. Using what Barley calls "codes of restoration", which includes codes of posed features, the cosmetic code, clothing codes and code of positions, the funeral director will try to create and communicate senses of "normality" and "naturalness" that are the opposite of the real funeral situation. In other words, he tries to show that nothing has happened when something so serious has happened.

Second, I would like to focus on the contemporary rituals in our contemporary societies because, as I said, even if there are some good pioneering works, the field has not yet been as thoroughly studied as ancient rituals have been. That is especially true in my own country. Having the enormous contribution that anthropologists and sociologists have worked at in the study of rituals in different ancient societies, we will be in a better position to understand what's the matter today with the rituals that modern societies, living in different situations with different contexts, have created and developed. Meanwhile, a dialogue with scientists from different backgrounds will contribute to further studies and more advanced understanding of what ritual is and what role it plays in specific cultures.

II. Ethnosemiotic and Ritual

Semiotics is a discipline, a field or a methodology: it depends on an author's point of view. I have been working with semiotics as a theory of culture but also as a fruitful methodology that has known a deep development in the last few decades. But one of the fields to which semioticians have paid less attention is ritual. As far as I know, most research linking semiotics and rituals has been done by anthropologists who cultivate the fecund approaches between semiotics and ritual.

Semioticians have paid almost no attention to the idea of an ethnosemiotic, because they have considered this field as one belonging to ethnology or anthropology, where contributions were made by V. Propp, in the folkloric field, and by G. Dumézil and C. Lévi-Strauss, in the analysis of myths (Greimas, 1979:135) I think that the latest developments of semiotic methodology, in Europe with the line of research inaugurated by Ferdinand de Saussure, as in the United States with the line initiated by the pioneering works of Charles Sanders Peirce, offer the possibility of a further development of ethnosemiotics as a field with enormous possibilities for achievements that will contribute to improve our understanding of different cultures that human beings have created, assimilated and transformed during thousands and thousands of years.

III. As Radcliffe-Brown pointed out thirty-five years ago, "neither social structure nor culture can be scientifically dealt with in isolation from one another... You can study culture only as a characteristic of a social system" (1957:106-107). It was with this idea in mind that I

became interested in some contemporary rituals in Maracaibo, Venezuela. I was convinced that one way of sketching the patterns of values, ideas and structures in ceaseless reequilibrium, that explains the social and cultural relationships in a specific society, was the study of ritual and how it works. Even if the importance and role of rituals within a society have been sometimes overemphasized, as when Rappaport said in 1979: "I take ritual to be the basic social act", ritual is nonetheless, like myth, one of the most constant cultural elements created by human beings in different cultures.

Nonetheless, I think that one of the most common mistakes made by scientists who share the Radcliffe-Brown principle is to try to find only reflections between society and culture, like in a mirror. The image given by one system or another -the social or the cultural- does not always correspond to the structure primarily found. We should trace what kind of transformations and changes, what kind of adaptations and accommodations, the values, symbols, and ideas are undergoing every time, in every context, and in every cultural and social system. Unlike scientists working in fields of the physical sciences, social scientists have to work with human being's facts, behaviors, ideas, values, and so forth. That means a world always non recurrent, always changing faster than the natural world does. However, the problem of dialectical relationships between cultural and social systems within a society is much more complicated when the researcher has to take into account the different cultural and social systems which have frequent contacts and exchanges with the ones he is studying. Here we have another dimension of relationships not now within the same society or culture, but with other societies or cultures.

I think that the approach to ritual would be more successful if we see it as a process with ceaseless interactions with the semiotic space where it is placed. This semiotic space is described by Lotman as the **semiosphere** which he defines as "the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages, not the sum total of different languages; in a sense the semiosphere has a prior existence and is in constant interaction with languages" (1990:123). The heterogeneity and the asymmetrical conditions of the **semiosphere** give to the ritual, as to other communication processes, its qualities of multiplicity and variation which characterizes not only its different kinds of integrating elements (objects, movements, words, colors, food, etc.) but also the generation

of multiple senses and messages, every one of which must be understood in relationship -as conditioned and conditioner- to the semiosphere.

As Lotman pointed out, "the whole semiosphere can be regarded as a generator of information" (127). This generation of information must be seen as a dialectical process in which a ritual, for instance, integrates themes, knowledge, and ideas, which are macrosemantic structures coming from the semiosphere, but at the same time produces new information to be placed in the semiosphere as an active whole.

The theoretical consequences of the preceding comments lead us to approach the ritual performance not as a homogeneous, univocal, and isolated behavior. On the contrary, we must see it as a living expression of a multivocal communication process, where society and groups, culture and values, express and receive expressions of an ever changing meaning.

An interesting paper written by Monica Wilson, "The Wedding Cakes: a Study of Ritual Change", shows how a symbolic element belonging to the so called western culture is appropriated and transformed in an unexpected way in the Nguni culture of Southern Africa. She analyses how "the wedding cake, borrowed from Europe, becomes two, one for the groom and one for the bride" (1972:188). Wilson demonstrates how complicated the process is of adapting a new symbol and how it becomes full of new values, thanks to a process not always clear and intelligible. "What particular symbols are retained, or borrowed, or transformed [she remarks] depends upon what catches the imagination. A poet's association always lies within the frame of his experience as a member of a particular society within a given culture, but inside that frame his imagination roves; the symbols used in rituals are poetic or dramatic forms accepted by a community, through time" (200) I would say, of course, it is this diversity and multi-variation of reflections and images which gives to the cultural and social life its richness and beauty, and by this means, it gives to the adventure of science its great variety and best challenges.

IV. I have made the preceding considerations because I judge they will allow us to partially establish a theoretical frame within which I will analyze and compare the Bridal Shower (BS) as it has been practiced in Maracaibo, Venezuela and in Bloomington, Indiana. Both studies were conducted through interviews done with people whose participation was

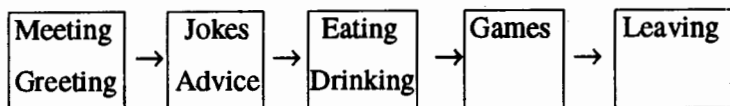
of various kinds: guests, organizers, hosts and brides. In both Maracaibo and Bloomington, the first thing I tried to figure out from the interviews was answers to, as I said before, elementary and simple questions: What happens in a BS? What kind of activities do people perform? In what order? Who establishes that order? Why are men not admitted to the shower? Why just women?

The collected statements allowed us to elaborate a **syntactic scheme** of what was going on during the shower, and also who was invited to participate. After having many descriptions, and after recording information from people whom I asked to give me a narration of what happened in the same temporal order that the shower was carried out, I found what I propose to be seen as a common pattern or structure. **The Bridal Shower ritual is a gathering of a group of women, usually done during the afternoon at a friend's or relative's house, about a month before marriage, where the group's members will show support and friendship to the bride.**

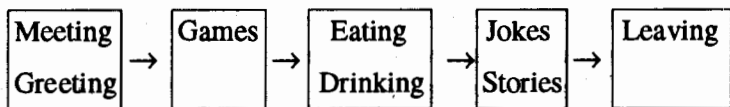
I began to pay attention to the BS in Maracaibo, Venezuela, because I heard so many stories women were telling about the fun they have at a BS, particularly the omni-presence of a sexual **isotopy**, which recurrently was expressed in many ways: jokes, food representation of male's genitalia, ornaments, drawings, etc. So I started interviewing women with lots of experience at being at BSs, and almost immediately a pattern of behavior and activities carried out during the shower surfaced. My study was conducted in a way that would allow me to look both the syntactic and semantic aspects of this women's ritual.

1. The Syntactic Scheme

I am aware of how much schemes usually impoverish the reality under study. Trying to give a representation of what we believe to be fundamental elements, sometimes we dispose of circumstances and variations that usually give originality to every performance. Nonetheless, I am using this scheme as a way of finding coherence and intelligibility to this phenomena. The syntactic scheme I elaborated was designed to portray both the elements that are constant during the BS ritual and the order in which they are performed. The first scheme I elaborated was like this:



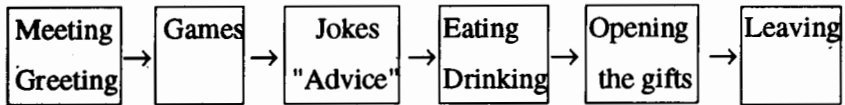
Later, with new interviews, it became clear that the shower in Maracaibo was focused on the joking aspect of the gathering. In the variations I have found, the jokes and funny stories are always presented with a vigorous semantic force. Also, I found that usually, when the gathering is complete or there are enough people for the hostess to estimate that the shower can formally begin, it starts with some games even if games are not so common in a Venezuelan BS. But it is at the moment of spicy jokes and hot stories when the shower arrives to a climax of amusement. It seems to me that the performance carried out during the gathering has an oriented movement where final climax is the entertainment that the jokes, gags, jests and pranks will create. This climax will be more or less strong depending on participation and abilities people in the gathering have. So, I decided to reformulate the syntactic scheme as follows:



The main stress, it seems to me, is placed on the amusement and fun that people can have together, but also, by this I mean, the solidarity, the companionship, and comradeship that the group wishes to offer the bride in this important stage of her life. This reformulated scheme shows what I call a **semiotic orientation**, an impulse by which the progression of actions leads toward a climax which shows the main objective of this ritual, as it is practiced in Maracaibo. In that sense, the use of jokes and all the activities aiming at having fun seems to be the expression of the main isotopy: support and solidarity.

The BSs I have studied in Bloomington show a different syntactic pattern. In fact, because it is the same ritual with the same basic structure -a concept which I would like to be understood as an organization of ceaseless changes- they share common elements but in different order, with a different **semiotic orientation**. These different **semiotic orientations are to be interpreted** only if we relate them to the different societies and to the semiosphere where this ritual takes place. The BS in

Bloomington, according to the information I have collected, can be represented in its syntactic organization as follows:



During the syntactic progress of the BS in Bloomington, the **semiotic tension** with which the actors are participating will produce a different kind of **semiotic orientation**. This orientation is not focused at fun, as shown in Venezuelan BS, but in the opening of the gifts because gifts are the most important elements of the ritual in this community. The strong meaning that gifts have in the American ritual can be discerned from the following facts that occur in this society and do not occur in the Venezuelan society:

- a) The giving of gifts during the BS.
- b) The opening of the gifts as the final moment, which raises expectations based on the strategy of surprise that is related to the gift communication process.
- c) The development of strategies of satisfaction of needs when a gift is given, and not only the answer to a social requirement. For example, the Bridal Registry lists that many big stores offer to the brides in order to allow guests to choose something that the bride has said she would like to have as a gift.
- d) The holding of more than one BS, some of which have an explicit requirement of an exact type of gift, like the "Kitchen Bridal Shower", "Bedroom Bridal Shower", "Lingerie Bridal Shower", etc.

For these reasons, I believe that there is a strong orientation during this ritual toward the act of receiving the gifts, which would be, according to some researchers, the expression of the substitution of the dowry. According to this hypothesis, the BS is a ritual that supplants the father's traditional role of provider of the starting home needs of his daughter. If this hypothesis is accurate, the ritual would have changed the traditional vertical father-daughter relationship into a horizontal relationship that links the bride to her friends and relatives in a more democratic relation-

ship. This transformation expresses a transformation in the traditional hierarchical society where the parents had the power to almost determine the entire future of their children.

2. The Semantic Isotopies

After analyzing the recorded interviews, I found some main semantic investments that, following the concept developed by A. J. Greimas, I will call **Isotopy**, which means "the iterativeness during the syntactic chain, of *classemes* that owes its homogeneity to the discourse's utterances" (1979:197).

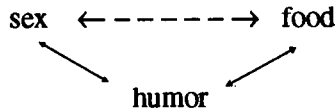
In my analysis of the BS in Maracaibo, I have found three main isotopies: sexual, alimentary, and humoristic. These three main meanings are disseminated along the syntactic chain, and they give the main themes that the ritual uses to communicate its main purpose: to show support and solidarity.

But the BS in Maracaibo is not only a way of showing support and solidarity. As I have said in a paper written last year, the BS is an opportunity for a symbolical transformation of the role of women in Venezuelan society. There, when the male's genitalia is represented using different kinds of food, like cakes, for instance, the bride is asked to eat this representation and so "by eating the male genital, the women shifts from ruled to ruler, from passive to active, from penetrated (in the "normal" sexual intercourse) to captor of the male genital, thanks to the oral cavity, symbolic of the vaginal cavity" (1991, to be published). The symbolic representation of the male genitalia is not made only with a cake but also with drawings, pins and fruits. The selection of this symbol is very far from being disinterested. It is not difficult to see in this representation a semiotic process by which the male genitalia becomes the most powerful representation of the power that men have and women desire. This symbolic consumption is just a search of power. "You are what you eat; by ingesting symbolically resonant substances, celebrants literally endow themselves with the special meanings encoded in those substances" (Stoeltje, B.J. and Bauman R., 1988:594). In a sense, the ritual is a semiotic representation of some of society's values within the group of women and, by that means, it allows them "to put up a feminist world within a male dominated society". The ritual communicates to the

actors involved the sense of their capacity to transform, even if it is only in a symbolical way, the real relationships between men and women in a particular society. We certainly are confronted here with a problem of power relationships, and the ritual is a performance by which women are trying to develop not just a response to the men's overwhelming power, but, at the same time, they are developing a strategy of confrontation not just symbolic but with a real social impact. So, this ritualization process is "a strategic mode practice [that] produces nuanced relationships of power, relationships characterized by acceptance and resistance, negotiated appropriation, and redemptive reinterpretation of the hegemonic order" (Bell, C., 1992:196). The previous considerations seem to confirm the hypothesis according to which the male genitalia is nothing different than the mighty symbol of power as it is logical to expect in a society having a strong sense of machismo.

The utilization of the different humoristic elements is the way used by the ritual's actors to develop an approach to the problem of taboos and interdictions imposed by men. In that sense, the BS in Venezuelan society is a series of transgressions against rules made by men, rules that validate a different morality for women and for men. Within these female and male moralities, the hardest tasks are imposed on women. Meanwhile, the men are much more liberal in the behavior they allow themselves. This transgression of the "normal" women's role is also expressed when the women tell stories and jokes with a deep sexual sense, a behavior usually not often seen as feminine in Venezuelan society. Here again, the humor enacts a semiotic strategy which aims to weaken, by means of ridicule, the men's power. As Bell says, "ritual, by focusing on the making and remaking of the body, reproduces the sociopolitical context in which it takes place while also attempting to transform it" (1992:209).

We can see how these two main isotopies, **sexual and alimentary**, are interdependent in a double sense. First because there is an old relationship between food and sex in our culture, which is invested once again in this ritual as a way of expressing and communicating within the group. Second, both meanings, separately and together are used to build up a new semantic field that may be called the **humoristic isotopie**.



Because in Venezuelan society every bride is always supposed to be a virgin, we may see this ritual as a way of preparing the bride for the sexual encounter, giving her stories, "advice", jokes and making suggestions that will allow her to be in better condition for her new sexual life. The eternal double condition of humor, in many cases similar to parody and satire, allows the actors to speak on the most serious subjects with the funniest stories.

On the contrary, BS in Bloomington seems to have a different sense when coping with the relationships with men. Instead of opposing a world dominated by men, the group seems to accept during the ritual values that they reject in contemporary normal social behavior. Maybe this conformity is understandable because, unlike the Venezuelan women, American women have reached a more egalitarian relationship with their partners.

I think that for a more reliable understanding of what the ritual means, of what they are trying to communicate, we have not only to pay attention to the social system where the rituals take place, as I said before, but also to the cultural system where the ritual being studied is placed and, within this macro-system, to other rituals related or not to the one which is our target. Following that principle, I examined also a men's ritual, quite famous in the United States, namely the **bachelor's party**. There I found an aspect which claimed my attention: Why does not the groom get gifts during his pre-wedding party? Why does the bride get gifts? Usually, most gifts given to a bride are aimed at providing the new home, so it seems as if the gifts were for her **because she will bear the responsibilities of keeping the house, the old women's role**. Instead, the groom is taken by his best man, usually his best friend, to develop a men's meeting in which we can find two main isotopies expressed in two main subjects: **sex and fun**. The group of men usually go to a bar with the idea of getting the groom drunk, so they can embarrass him, and also with the idea of some kind of "sexual baptism": they will rent sex-movie, or they will go to a topless bar, or they will hire a woman to perform some kind of dance in a hotel room, and so on. When we think about this, we see that the values lying in this opposition between bridal

shower/bachelor party is the old idea according to which it is the woman who, for almost "natural" reasons, is the one who must be in charge of the domestic work.

If the old feminine role of housekeeping is expressed by the kind of gifts that the bride receives, another traditional role is also expressed when we think of the kind of gift that is called *lingerie*. In fact, it seems that the meaning to be communicated to the bride with this kind of gift -and the accompanying jokes and sexual suggestions that usually follow- is that she must be beautiful and desirable for him. But not the inverse because he never get gifts of fancy masculine clothes aimed to please the bride's desires. We can see again an old value still expressed during the ritual performance that link in opposite ways society and ritual.

Of course, in American society these values have been under attack the last three or four decades, but they seem to be alive in some rituals that, for one reason or another, have not changed with the same quickness as the society has.

If we compare with the Venezuelan BS, we can see a main difference: whereas the Venezuelan women are trying to transform social relationships that they feel are biased and unjust and inequitable as they are, American women are trying to authenticate a social structure that they deeply believe in. If this hypothesis is reliable, the authentication would be expressed by means of the most common social value in American society: mass consumption. I will add new evidence. If American women accept the values we mentioned before, the old traditional feminine role expressed during the BS, it is because they know that it is a languid value, made vulnerable by the social transformations that women generated throughout American society. In other words, what is at stake during the American BS is, much more than just a feminine ritual, a process of exchange and communication of donations and offerings.

V. Conclusions

In fact, as we can see, we are confronting two expressions of the same ritual. I do believe that if we look at a historical analysis we will find a common origin for the Venezuelan BS and the American one. But, being the same ritual, at least at the beginning, its actors and circumstances have given to it a new role, it has seized different values according to the social and cultural system where it is placed. Venezuelan

women are using the BS's ritual to cope with the inequalities built up in their society. So it is not only because they want to offer support and solidarity to the girl who is going to be married, it is also because they want to work together in a symbolical intent, which parallels their struggle in every day society, for equality and respect.

American women, maybe because they have reached a much more equitable relationship in society, have neglected this value expressed in ritual and have given much more relevance to the pragmatic desire of getting gifts, as an expression of support and solidarity. This pragmatic aspect of the gift communication process seems to be much more linked to utilitarian aspects of life in the American culture. This is a hypothesis that would require further analysis than I am able to set forth here. I must say, nonetheless, that the separation of both rituals in American society, BS for the bride and Bachelor Party for the groom, has begun to weaken and so the ritual has become, especially among intellectuals and young people, a mixed gender party. But, as far as I know, the BS is still most of the time a party just for women.

As we can see, the ritual we have been exploring takes peculiarities according to the social and cultural context where it is performed. In Venezuelan society, the BS has taken a place within specific conditions in the relationships between men and women. In this way, the women use their gathering as a practice of transgression against the established male order. The transgression of men's rules is the vindication of a feminine world. There the ritual operates as a means of rebelling and of vindication. As far as my scarce knowledge allows me to propose such

a hypothesis, in American society as it behaves in Bloomington, women seem to accept a ritual which they know as having values that they do not share any more, like the traditional role of women as housekeeper. They can accept these traditional elements because they have refocused the ritual onto the idea of offering support and solidarity which are expressed particularly as a gift-giving activity, which, later, has been commercialized thanks to a process of mass consumption.

There are many contemporary rituals in different societies the study of which we sometime neglect. I am not talking about religious rituals, but about the different kinds of activities which pervade and some times saturate our entire social and cultural life. I believe that a systematic study of rituals like baby showers, graduation ceremonies, rituals of consumption, protocols, etc., if they are related to the social and cultural systems,

to the semiosphere, will allow us to understand the meaning of our behavior and our values. If many of these rituals have been studied by some researchers, this is not the case in Venezuela, where this line of research is relatively new.

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